

In 1776 the German scholar Johannes Griesbach published a text of the first three New Testament Gospels in a special format for convenient study. He called this work a “synopsis,” meaning not a summary but an arrangement in parallel columns so that corresponding passages of Matthew, Mark, and Luke could be compared easily. The affinity among the first three Gospels that discerning readers had already noticed could at last be documented in fine detail. Matthew, Mark, and Luke would ever afterward be known as the Synoptic Gospels. The Synoptics form a collection of their own within the larger collection of the four Gospels, which in turn is itself a collection, or canon, within the New Testament.

We might expect that the analytical method of study pioneered by Griesbach and others of his day would have little bearing on an alleged link between the Gospels and certain angelic beings described in Ezekiel and Revelation, other than to discredit it. However, one of the simplest and firmest conclusions of scholarly research, that the Synoptic Gospels form a subgroup, has a corollary in the collection of symbolic creatures. Recall that those creatures consist of a lion, a bull (or ox or calf), a man, and an eagle. At a glance one of these symbols, the man, stands out from the rest. To put it the other way around, the animals form an obvious subgroup. We can express the observation in a table:

Collection	Subgroup	Outlier
Lion, Bull, Man, Eagle (Tetramorph of Ezek & Rev)	Lion, Bull, Eagle	Man
Matthew, Mark, Luke, John (canonical Gospels)	Matthew, Mark, Luke	John

Such a characteristic is too general to justify any conclusions but it may prove significant later; even a faint clue ought not to be overlooked.

In comparing the Gospels another feature that emerges is the Jewish orientation of Matthew. All the Gospels are Jewish insofar as they describe a Jewish teacher who, in the company of his Jewish disciples, preaches mostly to the Jews of Syria-Palestine and invokes the commands and promises of the Jewish Scriptures. To single out the first Gospel in this respect is to say that it reflects Jewish attitudes and concerns even more strongly than do the other three. The Jewish coloration of Matthew is acknowledged by early Christian sources and confirmed by modern methods of study.

Before surveying the evidence concerning Matthew’s Jewishness we need to understand the origin of the word “Jew,” which offers a possible connection between the New Testament Gospels and the tetramorph symbols. The term is derived from *Judah* (Hebrew, *Yehuwdah*) as is more evident in languages such as Dutch (*Jood*) and German (*Jude*), whose words for a Jewish person incorporate the letter “d.” Judah was the largest and strongest of the twelve tribal groups that comprised ancient Israel.

According to the Bible, the Israelites united under a monarchy in the eleventh century BCE but later split into two kingdoms along tribal lines. The northern kingdom included most of the tribes and retained the name “Israel” while the southern kingdom, with its capital of Jerusalem, took the name “Judah” from the tribal identity of the majority of its population. The northern kingdom, whose capital was Samaria, was toppled in 722 BCE by Assyria, which lay to the east, in what is now Iraq. The Assyrians deported many northern Israelites and brought foreign peoples to settle in their territory. The weakened northern Israelite culture that emerged from this upheaval came to be called “Samaritan.”

When the southern kingdom, Judah, was likewise overrun by Mesopotamian armies in the sixth century BCE, many of its leading citizens were exiled to the city of their conquerors, Babylon. The people of Judah maintained their priesthood, traditions, and national identity intact during their decades-long sojourn and eventually returned to rebuild the city of Jerusalem with its temple. When the eastern Mediterranean came under Greek rule as part of the empire of Alexander the Great, the name by which

the southern Israelites were known, *Yehuwdiy* in Hebrew, became the Greek *Ioudaios*, “Judeans” or “Jews,” and came to include members of other tribes, such as Levi and Benjamin, who served and worshiped at the Jerusalem temple.

We will revisit this history in even greater detail in future posts. It means that the distinctive Jewish cultural tilt of Matthew’s Gospel has its roots in the southern Israelite kingdom of Judah. Moreover, there is a biblical association between Judah and one of the tetramorph symbols, the lion, to which we now turn.